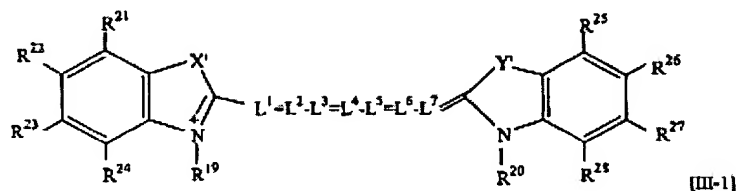


This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

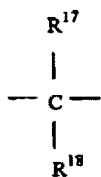
**Listing of Claims:**

Claims 1-28 (cancelled)

29. (Currently Amended) A sodium salt of a compound of formula III-1 having three or more sulfonic acid groups in a molecule



wherein  $L^1-L^7$  are the same or different and, each of  $L^1-L^3$  and  $L^5-L^7$  is substituted or unsubstituted methine and  $L^4$  is methine substituted by alkyl having 1 to 4 carbon atoms or an alkyl having 1 to 4 carbon atoms and substituted by a sulfonic acid group,  $R^{19}$  and  $R^{20}$  are lower alkyl having 1 to 5 carbon atoms and are substituted by a sulfonic acid group,  $R^{21} - R^{28}$  are the same or different and each is a hydrogen atom, a sulfonic acid group, a carboxyl group, a hydroxyl group, an alkyl(sulfoalkyl)amino group, a bis(sulfoalkyl)amino group, a sulfoalkoxy group, a (sulfoalkyl)sulfonyl group or a (sulfoalkyl)aminosulfonyl group, and  $X'$  and  $Y'$  are the same or different and each is a group of the formula



wherein  $R^{17}$  and  $R^{18}$  are unsubstituted lower alkyl having 1 to 5 carbon atoms.

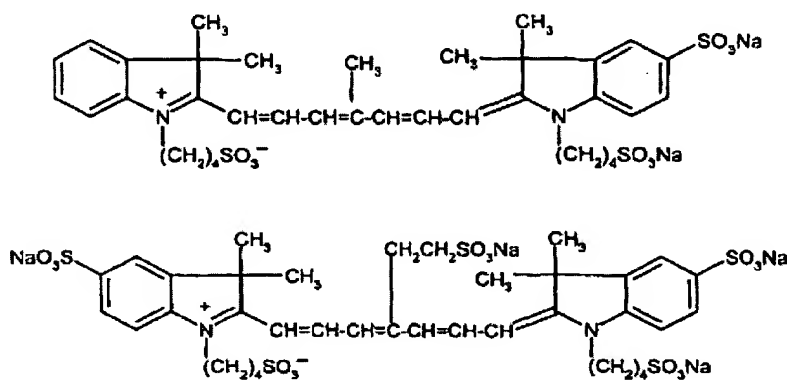
30. (Canceled)

31. (Currently Amended) A near infrared fluorescent contrast agent comprising the a sodium salt of claim 29 and a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

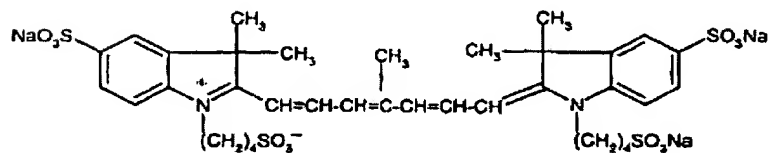
32. (Currently Amended) A near infrared fluorescent contrast agent comprising the a sodium salt of claim 34 and a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

33-34. (Cancelled)

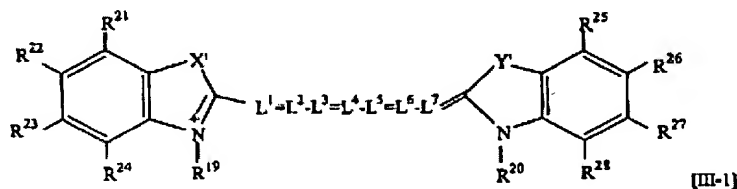
35. (Currently Amended) The sodium salt of claim 29, ~~wherein said sodium salt is of~~ the formula



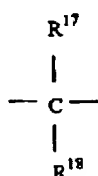
or



36. (New) A method of fluorescence imaging comprising introducing a compound of claim 29 into a living body, exposing the body to excitation radiation, and detecting near infrared fluorescence from said compound.
37. (New) A method of claim 36 for angiography.
38. (New) A method of claim 36 for tumor imaging.
39. (New) A compound of claim 29 wherein lower alkyl in R<sup>19</sup> and R<sup>20</sup> is of 1-4 C-atoms.
40. (New) A compound of claim 29 wherein lower alkyl in R<sup>19</sup> and R<sup>20</sup> is of 1-2 C-atoms.
41. (New) A compound of claim 29 having three sulfonic acid groups.
42. (New) A compound of claim 29 having four sulfonic acid groups.
43. (New) A compound of claim 40 having four sulfonic acid groups.
44. (New) A sodium salt of claim 29 wherein each L<sup>1</sup>-L<sup>3</sup> and L<sup>5</sup>-L<sup>7</sup> is methine or methine substituted by lower alkyl; lower alkyl substituted by a sulfonic acid group, carboxy or hydroxy; lower alkoxy; phenyl; naphthyl; phenyl or naphthyl each substituted by halo; or said L<sup>1</sup>-L<sup>3</sup> and L<sup>5</sup>-L<sup>7</sup> substituents are bonded to each other to form a ring containing three of said methine groups, said ring optionally being condensed with a ring containing an additional one of said L<sup>1</sup>-L<sup>3</sup> and L<sup>5</sup>-L<sup>7</sup> methine groups.
45. (New) A sodium salt of a compound of formula III-1 having three or more sulfonic acid groups in a molecule



wherein  $L^1$ - $L^7$  are the same or different, each of  $L^1$ - $L^3$  and  $L^5$ - $L^7$  is substituted or unsubstituted methine and  $L^4$  is methine substituted by alkyl or -S-alkyl, each having 1 to 4 carbon atoms, or by alkyl or -S-alkyl, each having 1 to 4 carbon atoms and each substituted by a sulfonic acid group,  $R^{19}$  and  $R^{20}$  are lower alkyl having 1 to 5 carbon atoms and are substituted by a sulfonic acid group,  $R^{21}$  -  $R^{28}$  are the same or different and each is a hydrogen atom, a sulfonic acid group, a carboxyl group, a hydroxyl group, an alkyl(sulfoalkyl)amino group, a bis(sulfoalkyl)amino group, a sulfoalkoxy group, a (sulfoalkyl)sulfonyl group or a (sulfoalkyl)aminosulfonyl group, and  $X'$  and  $Y'$  are the same or different and each is a group of the formula



wherein  $R^{17}$  and  $R^{18}$  are unsubstituted lower alkyl having 1 to 5 carbon atoms.

46. (New) A method of fluorescence imaging comprising introducing a compound of claim 35 into a living body, exposing the body to excitation radiation, and detecting near infrared fluorescence from said compound.

47. (New) A method of claim 46 for angiography.

48. (New) A method of claim 46 for tumor imaging.